

Darwyn Cooke: Toward the Heavens

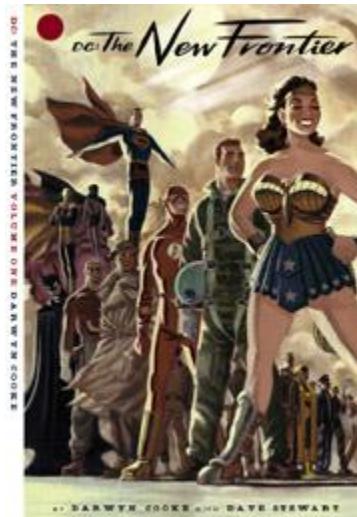
Writer/illustrator Darwyn Cooke has quickly become one of the most dynamic creators in comics. Originally a storyboard artist on the animated series **Batman Beyond**, Cooke made the jump to comics in 2000 with the one-shot **Batman: Ego**. He followed that project with a six-issue run as the artist of the re-tooled **Catwoman**, then wrote and illustrated the critically acclaimed graphic novel, **Selina's Big Score**. Last year Cooke completed his most ambitious project to date, **DC: The New Frontier**, a six part, 384-page epic that chronicled the formation of the Justice League and restored a classic sense of wonder to the team. I talked to Darwyn about the heroic ideal in America, the trend of deconstruction in superhero comics and the timeless spirit of Hal Jordan.

MARKISAN NASO: After you completed your one-shot, **Batman: Ego**, DC asked you to come up with a Justice League yarn. Were you surprised by the opportunity to craft a story starring the company's most important characters?

DARWYN COOKE: Actually, yes, I was. We have to keep in mind, it was 1999 when **Frontier** was first considered, and I believe that back then, Grant's run on **JLA** had really catapulted the book into the spotlight. DC was very keen for projects involving the JLA at the time, and while I was unsure if I was appropriate for a super-team book, once I found the heart of my story, it clicked together for me.

NASO: At the time you were relatively new to comics, having just made the jump from animation (Cooke worked on **Batman Beyond**). How did working in animation help you as a comic book storyteller?

COOKE: Most of my work on the shows was as a storyboard artist. In animation, the Storyboard artist has to create the blueprint for the script he has been handed. Shot choices, angles, lighting, acting, a sense of what scenes to punch up, and what to speed up, stretch out, etc. Action choreography, prop and background design are other aspects that you contribute to. All of these facets of the job have helped my comic book storytelling. In particular, you learn how to stage scenes for maximum effect, and how to draw people "acting." Most comic artists have three or four expressions for people. Animation work forces you to explore hundreds of emotions through clear expressions and body language.



NASO: **DC: The New Frontier** focuses on relatively un-mined territory from the Silver Age — the time just before the Justice League was formed. What drew you to this particular period in DC history?

COOKE: The lack of continuity that would inhibit a good story. Plus, it allowed me to watch these characters grow into who we know. Those kind of character arcs are always more compelling. The other big pull of this era was the kind of place America was at the time. I distinctly remember it all kinda gelling when I looked at the turbulent social history of the time. With Korea, HUAC, Tailgunner Joe, the Cold War, the civil rights movement and of course the Space Race, I saw an incredibly wonderful opportunity; to place the Silver Age DC heroes against the actual world they were apparently inhabiting, instead of the "Leave it to Beaver" world of the Silver Age DCU. Once this was established, I realized what the biggest challenge was going to be; I wanted to prove that the world was as shitty then as it is now, but this handful of people was able to acquire great power and use it altruistically. The big challenge was to show that times haven't changed all that much, but our definition of the heroic ideal certainly has.

NASO: In the final issue of **NF**, you use JFK's famous speech about the New Frontier. It's a very uplifting address that accentuates the themes of hope and heroism found throughout **NF**. How has the definition of the heroic ideal changed since JFK gave that speech?

COOKE: Well, I don't know if the heroic ideal has changed that much, but the hero in practice has changed drastically. Every decade since that speech, the media's been able to render world events in a more transparent fashion. We've been forced to see that these heroic ideals are indeed simply the thing of folklore. Our governments, our teachers, our priests, filmmakers, sports stars — our sense of leadership has been eroded by revelation after revelation regarding everything from JFK through Watergate, Central America, Corporate America's abandonment of the working class, blah, blah, blah.

In the world at large, the heroic ideal remains, but today the common thinking is that only a sucker would play fair in a world out to screw him. Day to day, everyone is navigating an unfair and somewhat corrupted system — so you play the game to one degree or another. Today's "heroes" reflect that.

There are moments of ideal horror and ideal need where you will find rare individuals who act heroically — who do the ideal thing. But day to day, it simply isn't sustainable. Now, the grand illusion is that these are darker, less simple times, but I'm fairly certain that's bullshit. In the 1950s, the men creating comics knew the difference between the real world and the superhero comics they produced... but that was the point. They were supposed to be simple morality plays for youngsters. It wasn't that these men were starry-eyed dolts who thought the world was a fair place where justice triumphed; they were being paid to create genre fiction for children and young adults.

NASO: For a while now, people have been talking about the troubles of the comic industry, from the lack of mainstream acceptance to failed marketing to decreased sales. But historically there have been spikes in general public interest in comics. Does the change in the way people view heroes have anything to do with the fluctuations in the health of the comic book industry?

COOKE: Hmmmm, I don't think so. There hasn't been any real spike in outside interest since the early 1990s, and it wasn't fueled so much by new readers as it was new club members and speculators. I firmly believe every other so-called spike was simply a spike within the existing market. That is, sucking more money per month out of the same customers. Both of the Big Two are terrified of the Mass Market for two reasons:

1. It would take a major investment and risk to regain the mass market.
2. Comic creators, editors and publishers would actually have to do their jobs — sell populist fare by the truckload that appealed to the mass market. They would have to give up this tight little circle where people care more about Bruce's feelings than they do whether there's a Batman story actually taking place. They'd have to work all ages with public light cast on the book's actual content, they'd have to compete with better written and produced entertainment from other media. Books that didn't sell would die. "Creators" who couldn't meet a monthly schedule would be restricted to specials and one-shots. Public taste and trends would have to be embraced. The precious superhero would have to share the stage with other more relevant genres like Romance, Crime, Horror, Humour and the like. Dicks like Kevin Smith would have to save their juvenile, oral-sex innuendo for something other than a mainstream DC comic.

The comic book industry in America is a cottage industry aimed at a very exclusive audience. That's why they don't sell. For 20 years, Hollywood has been making millions off comic properties and the zombies chant about how it will translate in sales... and it never does. Because the comics are cryptic, inaccessible, overpriced and aimed at anything other than a mass market.

NASO: So how has **NF** done in terms of sales and reader feedback?

COOKE: Far better than anyone seems to realize! From a sales standpoint, each issue was three regular comics worth of material with a price of \$6.95, so the charts that show quantities don't reflect that. Issue one was DC's best moneymaker that month, I believe.

Reader feedback has been phenomenal, and I'd actually like to thank everyone I've had a chance to talk with over the last year. The boards and the cons have shown me how much people have enjoyed the series, and I am a storyteller at heart, so this has been extremely gratifying.

NASO: New Frontier is an epic tale that must have taken you some time to research. How did you prepare to write and draw this book?

COOKE: NF took four years to get approval from DC, so there was more than enough time to prepare. I love my Google, but most of my research was library-based. Literally, thousands of pages of Silver Age DCU books and even more historical reference and historical fiction. Then of course there was the need to define the look, and a great deal of research went into creating the sense that the story was convincingly taking place in that bygone era of Chevrons and Woogles. I really like to point out the inspirations for the work I do, and I'd be remiss if I didn't mention these remarkable books: **The Golden Age** by James Robinson and Paul Smith, **American Secrets** by Gerard Jones and Eduardo Barreto, **American Tabloid** by James Ellroy and **The Right Stuff** by Tom Wolfe.

NASO: Why did **NF** take so long to be approved?

COOKE: Continuity, plain and simple. For three years the project was refitted a few times to reflect modern continuity. That's when I kinda pulled the project off the table. I just couldn't do it in continuity without the entire story becoming some gigantic footnote to the caprice of writers from the last 30 years. Generally, if I can't be true to the creator's intention and spirit, I will probably shy away from working on a character.

NASO: While **NF** is a story that involves the main characters of the Justice League, Hal Jordan is clearly the protagonist of the series. Hal's life as a test pilot and aspiring astronaut really seems to embody the overall theme of **NF**, which to me is this romantic concept of discovery — of the self and also the unknown. How do you view Hal Jordan's journey and why did you decide to use his story as the creative lynchpin for **NF**?

COOKE: Most importantly, I suppose, was my personal attachment to Green Lantern and Hal, coupled with the Mercury and Apollo Space programs. These were the stuff of my childhood imagination. It is almost impossible to explain to someone what it was like to be a kid during that era unless you were there. Today we worship fey actors and millionaire children who throw or hit balls. But the Astronaut — good fuck, they strapped in on top of huge jerry-rigged tubes of unstable fuel and fired themselves toward the heavens!

Listen to any athlete today crying about his sore arm or the way the press treats him and then listen to the radio tapes from the Apollo 13 Astronauts as they try to find a way home before they run out of air or freeze to death. So Hal and the whole space program became a symbol of something that has vanished from our society. The man with the daring and the balls to put it on the line for the sake of it. For the thrill of it. Risk your life to feel an extra 100 mph of speed. Gamble everything to fly that much faster or go that much further. And these men... Jesus, they were like ice. Pilots heading straight into the runway at 500 mph — they're 100 feet from exploding on the pavement and the tower asks, "Do you wish to declare an emergency?" Invariably, the pilot's response is something like, "Negative. I think if I can just —" and then you hear the explosion. And unbelievably, the very best of them did it for peanuts. Air Force pay and whatever perks that came with being a hotshot pilot. No million dollar paydays or private jets or summer homes in Monaco.

So the persona of Hal offered all the romance and mystique you need for a great hero. From a character point of view, Hal is a fairly regular Joe who doesn't really fit in. He's perfect in every way I suppose, except he has nothing to believe in that is any bigger than he is. And **New Frontier** is a story of his discovery of that higher power that he can put his faith in. Once Hal is able to graft his courage and values to a purpose, he becomes a complete person.

NASO: Given the heavy emphasis on Hal, were you at all concerned about giving the other Justice Leaguers enough "screen time?"

COOKE: Perhaps at first, but it was amazing how characters like J'onn began to take over certain thematic areas of the story. The book's structure was also purposefully a series of vignettes, so that we could jump from character to character without having to bring them together until the end. As the story grew, J'onn, King Faraday and a few others began to naturally balance the story.

NASO: When I describe the story of **NF** to friends, they usually ask me, "Is it an Elseworlds book?" This has been a tough question to answer because **NF** doesn't exactly fit in with DC continuity, but at the same time it does portray the original characters. So, how does your book fit in with the DC Universe, if at all?

COOKE: I put it this way: However you want it to. The book was purposefully constructed without a label, so each reader can see it fit however they want. As Paul, Dan and Mark all told me, just tell a killer story. That being said, I personally see it as a legitimate pre-crisis piece of DCU history. It doesn't contradict anything major from the time, and the book wraps very neatly at the beginning of the pre-crisis **JLA**. But if I were you, I'd email the anti-monitor for the real answer.

NASO: Since **NF** does deal with vastly uncharted territory, what characters presented the biggest challenge in terms of developing individual stories based on your "Silver Age" research?

COOKE: Flash was tough, 'cause Barry is simply a straight-up, true-blue kinda guy. Somewhat bland. But I twigged to the notion that Waid put out there, that Barry worships Superman. And then it

kinda occurred that Barry would probably have a bit of an inferiority complex. Superman is towing planets, and he's chasing the Trickster around a Jewelry Store. So Barry is like, waiting for his shot to prove he's able to do more. That, coupled with his evergreen love for Iris, gave me a hero with all the heart, who's hungry to prove himself.

NASO: A while ago some message boarders compared your version of Superman in **NF** to Frank Miller's **Dark Knight Returns** Superman. You took exception to this. Why do you think the comparison was made and how is your Man of Steel different?

COOKE: I think the **DKR** Superman is a bit of a two-dimensional tool and it's easy to see why some fans don't appreciate it. I happen to think it was very appropriate at the time.

In **NF**, I wanted to show how even the best people can become somewhat blind to the downside if they're committed to a cause or a nation. But I also wanted to show how Superman grows into a more aware individual, and uses his awareness to galvanize those around him. The turning point in **New Frontier** to me is actually the scene where Faraday and Superman shake hands in Book 5. That is

where the main conflict is resolved based on growth, understanding, and the need to unite for the greater good.

I suppose the problem I had was one of readers who see Superman behaving a certain way in the first 100 pages of a 400-page story and they jump the gun. They aren't thinking, "Well hey, maybe this is going somewhere different." They think "Oh, it's **DKR**" or "Oh, it's this or that." The whole Superman/Batman animosity thing was a red herring and I didn't want reader perceptions of **NF** to be boiled down to misleading sound bites.

NASO: Your take on the Justice League is very respectful of the original versions of the characters. Was this something that naturally developed from setting a story in the "Silver Age" or did your vision of these characters simply fit better in the "Silver Age" time period?

COOKE: Both are true, I believe. I feel that if the character is good enough to have survived for 40 years, there is a core spirit to it that is easiest found in the work of the series creators.

NASO: You've made some negative comments on the net about comic book creators deconstructing classic characters, such as Mark Millar's new take on the Avengers, **The Ultimates**. Given your feelings about the "core spirit" of superheroes, can you elaborate on your position?

COOKE: A few months ago [4 artist] Steve McNiven and I were having a scotch and he asked me the same question. By the way, for the record, Steve is a wonderful man who knows me to be a misguided fool. Anyway, I put it this way: If you change the core character — not the costume, or color, or powers — if you change the core character, then you are denigrating something you didn't create. Example: taking the free world's most fearless man and best jet pilot and turning him into a drunkard who can't operate a Willy's Jeep for short end attention and sales spikes. If you're going to use that character and you have to violate that core essence, then use another character.

NASO: Why do you think deconstruction is so popular right now?

COOKE: Because its much easier to write, and it is servicing an aging, bored market that wants it.

NASO: Given your stance on superhero deconstruction, does this limit the types of books you'll work on?

COOKE: It sure does. When **NF** was wrapping up, my editor, Mark Chiarello, suggested that I consider a monthly. I pitched DC two ideas for a monthly I would write and draw; one involving a Spy/Espionage unit that was on the periphery of the DCU and the other was a real hard assed, straight, no chaser **Batman** arc where I had about six original villains I would roll out. My caveats where that I wouldn't have to contend with "event" crossovers, and that it be an A-list book. With DC's plans for the next while, there wasn't room for either of these things to happen. My plate is very full with a few other things right now, so it's all good, and Dan and I will probably talk more in the future as areas open up.

NASO: I'm curious about this **Batman** pitch. Everyone knows Batman has one of the greatest rogues galleries in comics. But it's been a while since a new Batman villain has really captured readers' imaginations. By creating six original villains is your goal to make some of them stick? Do you want to see new enemies become classic Batman villains?

COOKE: Well, yes! Its been a long time since we've had any original villains that weren't in some way tied to past continuity, and when Mark Chiarello and I discussed this project, I was firm about us not leaning on established villains. It would have been a great book. The title was **Batman: Crime**, and it was going to be a straight, no-chaser crime comic. I had decided we'd only see Batman on the case he was working. No moaning in the cave, no Alfred, no 13 teenagers clogging the cave in pornstar

spandex. Just Batman, the cops, the city and the psychos. My hopes were to shoot for the stars with all six new villains, and hope that one of them captured the reader's hearts. C'est la vie. Maybe in a couple years.

NASO: Do you have any interest in returning to the "Silver Age" time period and writing other stories about the Justice League?

COOKE: There is a small King Faraday story that takes place in Cuba in 1955 coming up in my issue of **Solo** and who knows what the future will hold. I've just wrapped my issue of **Solo**, I wrote a **Justice League Unlimited** cartoon for Bruce [Timm] featuring the Suicide Squad, and I'm well into my creator-owned graphic novel, which should see release in the late summer, so I'm not rusting away in the yard. There has been much speculation about an **NF** sequel, and while that would be unlikely and at least a couple years away (if at all), I can tell you I know the story from front to back — I even have the title — **JLA: Bay of Pigs**.

NASO: Will your creator-owned GN deal with themes of heroism and hope like **New Frontier**?

COOKE: Very much so. It is actually the result of a question that arose during **New Frontier**. Was the notion of the heroic ideal still valid today? Could I tell an exciting story that convincingly portrayed people doing the right thing in today's society without seeming naive or nostalgic? It also deals with something I prefer to spandex — Giant Robots! I'm hard at work on this now, and I hope for a late 2005 release. Tentatively this book will be about 150 pages and will see a hardcover release first, with softcover to follow. (Jesus, just like a real book!)

NASO: Anything else you're working on?

COOKE: Also coming up, I've got a 22-page **Green Lantern** story that I'm drawing for Geoff Johns. It's a very heartfelt story, that focuses on Hal's love of flight. This is a great project, because it gives Geoff and I a chance to work together on our favorite DC hero. I think the readers will be pleasantly surprised by this story. It could easily be a "lost" chapter of **New Frontier** or **Rebirth**.

*Darwyn Cooke has provided SBC with an exclusive look at three pages from the upcoming **Green Lantern: Secret Files 2005**. "The story takes place during three periods in Hal's life," Cooke told SBC. "I used a somewhat different approach for each segment."*

Cooke said the first page is drawn in his own style, the second is a nod to Gil Kane and the third is inspired by Neal Adams.



